

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND AFTER



FOUNDED BY JAMES KNOWLES.

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NORMAN Pearson
HYMNS

HYMNS in general enjoy a certain amount of vague popularity of which the hymn in particular is usually quite unworthy. Some hymns are endeared to us by association with the past. The great Advent hymn, for instance, entered early into the lives of most of us, and is still treasured in the hearts of thousands. Others are cherished for their connexion with some joy or sorrow of the individual life. Others, again, owe their popularity to their tunes. Finally, some rightly deserve our ungrudging admiration. The bulk of the crowd live largely on the credit of these favoured few, and make rather a sorry show on their own merits. I refer throughout to *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, as being the collection of hymns most familiar to the public.

‘Our modern hymnals have long been a standing proof of the difficulty of writing good hymns.’ Thus speaks *The Dictionary of Theology*, and to this professional opinion the layman must give a melancholy assent. With everything in its favour—time, place, surroundings—the ordinary hymn leaves the ordinary person cold. Speaking broadly, and subject to all just exceptions, it is destitute of anything which can kindle his interest or touch his heart. Its language is conventional, its sentiment unreal, its metaphors outworn and often misleading. There was a time when religious thought was inclined to see in the wanderings of the Israelites and their final attainment of the promised land the highest symbol of the Christian’s life-struggle and his final triumph. Modern thought has passed beyond that stage, but the conventional hymn remains there. It cannot shake free of ‘Canaan’s happy shore,’ ‘Kedar’s tents,’ ‘Jordan’s stream,’ ‘Egypt, Edom, Babylon,’ and so forth. To the Jews of old all these were living realities in the story of their race, but to the Englishman of to-day, even as metaphors, they are flat, stale, and unprofitable. A similar unreality appears in the treatment of religious sentiment. We look for the genuine outpouring of devotion, only to find too often in its place a meaningless gush of pious expressions. The hymn sometimes becomes a sanctuary for debased ideals which cannot live in the wholesome breezes of honest existence. The dignity of human life, the sanctity of its purpose, the use and abuse of its joys and sorrows, the moral value and signifi-

cance of its struggles, its triumphs, its defeats—all these are frequently ignored, or even denied. Man is presented rather as a ‘worm of earth,’ too vile to deserve anything but that ‘uttermost damnation’ which seems to the hymn writer the natural destiny of a being whose place in the scheme of things is a ‘little lower than the angels.’ Faith in the divine assistance of human struggles, the divine co-operation with human endeavour, is an essential element of any real religion. It finds various expressions, but, in one form or another, it is always there, and its presence strengthens into achievement many an effort which would otherwise break down. The tendency of the hymn writer (with some exceptions) is to distort this conception by ascribing all value to the divine energy, and reducing the human effort to worthlessness. Man, on this view, is not only devoid of any merit, but is utterly incapable of acquiring it; a doctrine which would paralyse human endeavour and pauperise the moral sense. Indeed, the regenerate man of the hymn is apt to be a more distasteful figure than the open sinner. He has lost all his interest in the things of this life. These at their best are hollow, at their worst are sinful. His one absorbing anxiety is to save, as Charles Kingsley, I think, has put it, his ‘dirty little soul’; and, under this strain all his generous instincts have been stifled. He perpetually sighs for death, and whimpers to be relieved from life’s burdens. Such persons may exist, but they form morbid exceptions to honest Nature’s rule. The ordinary man does not yearn to die; nor does he

Linger shivering on the brink,
And fear to launch away.

When death comes he will face it. Meanwhile the path of life is before him, and he treads it as best he may. Its obstacles and dangers are his opportunities. He may stumble, but he will struggle on. He knows himself to be imperfect, but he certainly does not believe himself to be vile. If he were bound to make the choice, he would assuredly prefer Cecil Rhodes to St. Simeon Stylites. He has little sympathy with the selfishness which renounces the responsibilities of life, or the cowardice which collapses in despair of it; and, if he sought for an ideal, he would find it rather in

One who never turned his back, but marched breast forward;
Never doubted clouds would break;
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph;
Held, we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better, sleep to wake.

It is obvious, moreover, as a matter of fact, that we do not indulge in the emotions described by the hymnal. We do not

share its hysterical raptures or abandon ourselves to its equally hysterical abasement. They may appeal to warmer temperaments, but the Englishman is simply not built that way. His attitude in the matter is not the least lacking in reverence. He does not think lightly of prayer and praise. But somehow the maxim '*Laborare est orare*' rings truer to his ear.¹ He is ready enough to recognise his own shortcomings and the duty of striving to rise to better things. But no sense of unworthiness will drive him into the welter of penitence in which some hymns seem to revel. He will not 'beat the breast' or 'in ashes mourn,' or in any other way permit honest repentance to degenerate into abject humiliation. Professor James happily indicates in a few lines what seems to me to be the religious temper of the Anglo-Saxon. He writes (*Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 38) :

Religion, if hostile to light irony, is equally hostile to heavy grumbling and complaint. . . . There must be something solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude which we denominate religious. If glad, it must not grin or snicker; if sad, it must not scream or curse.

To this temper the exaggerations of the hymn are, like all extravagances, necessarily distasteful.

In other ways also the hymn writer is often rather tactless. He has a perverse knack of getting hold of unsuitable objects or of treating suitable subjects in an unsuitable way. The eschatology of some hymns recalls the savage gloating of Tertullian over the tortures of the damned. In others, the simple note of praise or devotion is smothered under a mass of theology. Metaphorical representations of the Church and its members are pushed to extravagant lengths, and the language and imagery of the Apocalypse are introduced with a very free and not too judicious hand.

And thus at many points the hymns do violence to our better instincts. They clash with our hopes and aspirations for the hereafter and with our ideas of the relations between the human and divine. The sensuous splendour of gold and jewel which might touch an Eastern fancy is out of place for us. In its time it may have served a purpose, but that time is past.

With jasper glow thy bulwarks,
Thy streets with emeralds blaze;
The sardius and the topaz
Unite in thee their rays;
Thine ageless walls are bonded
With amethyst unpriced.

Material glories of this kind do not enter into our dreams of the abiding city which awaits us. The alternative vision of green

¹ This maxim is admirably expressed in Hymn 475.

pastures and water springs, oil and wine, milk and honey, is equally material and equally unsatisfying, and is founded only on a perversion of Old Testament ideas. Even if this were not so, the agricultural prosperity which the Israelite prized for his earthly life some 3000 years ago obviously cannot satisfy the hopes of the Englishman for his eternal hereafter. Nor are the conditions of the future existence proposed to us in the hymn more attractive than its surroundings. It is hardly too much to say that in some respects they are such as no self-respecting being would submit to, and no Deity whom we could venerate would require. Surely the future must be regarded as being linked, through the present, with the past, all three forming parts of one continuous scheme. And if this be so, the character of each stage of our future existence must be such as will permit of the due development of the faculties brought over from the stage preceding it. It cannot be seriously supposed that a man's nature is radically transformed by the mere fact of physical death : yet nothing short of this will justify some of the eschatologies of the hymnal. One would need, for instance, to be radically transformed before such a future as that depicted in Hymn 230 could seem reasonably desirable. All that is best in us aspires to a hereafter of growth : the hymnal offers us only a hereafter of stagnation.

As to the literary merit of the hymns we ought not, perhaps, to be too exacting : yet it is a little strange that we are content to employ for divine service verses which would not be admitted to a third-rate magazine. We could not expect every hymn to be a great poem, but we might reasonably look for a much greater measure of literary earnestness and taste in the hymn writer. The slipshod style in which words are strung together, with more regard to their sound than to their sense, the hackneyed terminology, the confusion of metaphor, the jumble of the material and spiritual which makes one wince, and the washy sentiment and bemuddled thought of so many of the hymns, are all faults which could be rectified. To take a single example, a little ordinary care would surely have excluded from Hymn 213 such lines as these :

This stream doth water Paradise,
It makes the Angels sing ;

or :

Faith sees and hears : but O for wings,
That we might taste and feel !

Sometimes, indeed, it is only possible to avoid an overwhelming sense of the grotesque by steadily ignoring the natural meaning of

the words. Take, for instance, Hymn 405.² Here we have first the picture of a smitten shepherd and a flock threatened by a 'ravening wolf.' We next learn that the wolf is anxious to bind and crucify the sheep; but this design is counteracted by the conversion of the wolf, who turns out to be St. Paul, and forthwith becomes a 'gentle lamb'—hardly a felicitous description, perhaps, of the great Apostle. A hugger-mugger like this cannot claim respect, let alone reverence, and is more likely to provoke ridicule. Indeed, from these causes hymns are, in point of fact, beginning to fall into contempt. This is a feeling from which any form of worship should be zealously protected. Mere hostility is not nearly so dangerous; for opposition will often quicken vitality, and an honest antagonist can respect what he opposes. A creed or liturgy may successfully resist the open attacks of its enemies, but it must ultimately wither under the secret contempt of its friends. Now, it is worth an effort to save our hymns from this fate, and for more reasons than one. The musical services of modern times have encroached to some extent on congregational singing. We have the Psalms left, of course, and on the Psalms no one can wish to lay a sacrilegious finger. But, from the nature of the case, some of the Psalms are necessarily inapplicable to the facts and feelings of the present day. Here, then, is a gap which the hymn might fill. But to do so it must be attuned to modern ideas; the thought which inspires it must be true to religion without being false to fact; and its '*Sursum corda*' must cover no appeal to which our better instincts would answer '*Vade retro Sathanas.*' The musical service, moreover, tends to make us forget one great possibility of congregational singing. The emotion of a crowd is admittedly something more than the total isolated emotions of the individuals who compose it. The psychology of the subject is rather obscure, but the fact seems clear, and it gives to united song a psychical power, an emotional magic of its own. Most of us, at some time or other, in theatre, cathedral, or procession, have bent to the sway of this strange influence, which touches the heart, fires enthusiasm, or deepens resolve, playing in subtle fashion on the hidden depths of our nature. And the hymn may claim its share in this if only it will learn to deserve it, if only the aim of all concerned should be to set 'perfect music unto noble words.' And here let me touch for one moment on the music. I have said that some hymns owe their popularity to their tunes. There are, on the other hand, some tunes which would paralyse any hymn. Like a certain production already celebrated in verse, they 'distinctly

² This, which is a translation of an old Latin hymn (*Pastore percusso, minas*), has, I believe, been omitted from the latest edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*.

resemble an air,' but hardly more. They suggest the struggles of a composer who piles up eccentricities to conceal his lack of power, and they demand a vocal agility which can hardly be expected in the multitude.

As for the hymns themselves, surely the time has come for a sensible revision by some authority which would command the respect even of those who might dissent from its conclusions. It should be broadly representative in composition, so as to give expression not only to clerical opinion on the subject, but to lay sentiment and literary judgment also. The revision would necessarily be drastic, but it should proceed tenderly, so that nothing genuinely dear to the people should be sacrificed, whatever its demerits may be. For the hymn-book of a national Church must appeal to the nation at large, not merely to select portions of it. The conceptions in which the thought of the cultivated man takes form, the ideals to which he aspires, would be too complex for the grasp of a lowlier mind. More than this, they would be without warmth or colour to the humble folk, whose lives are often sadly lacking in either, and to whom a dream of some happy nook in the Delectable Mountains is fairer than any brilliant vision of spiritual advance. Subject to these reservations, I would say : discard all that is unreal, all that is out of touch with what religion means for us to-day. Discard the conventional hysterics of penitence, the exaggerated bewailings of human worthlessness, and the abject depreciation of divine vengeance. Discard sham raptures, which repel the reason and often shock the moral sense. Let theological speculation be left severely alone, and theological dogma touched with a very light hand. We may go further yet. There are certain doctrines which are accepted with reluctance by some and are openly disputed by others. Let us keep these troublous matters out of hymns altogether, and leave them to be dealt with, if necessary, from the pulpit. And so may our hymns be made fit once more to fill a worthy place in the great liturgy to which they belong.

After the revision we should, of course, have to fill the places of the hymns which had been discarded ; and contemporary talent would probably be equal to the task. To sit down in cold blood to write a hymn may seem rather a forlorn undertaking, and it must be admitted that at present there is no very spirited demand for this class of literature. But the mere fact of the revision would give the needful encouragement ; and even without this impulse the attempt has been made with success, notably, for instance, by Newman. Moreover, if further material be needed, we could easily borrow or adapt from the secular poets. To some extent this has already been done, but the selections have not always been too fortunate. We owe to Cowper, for instance,

that unpardonable hymn ‘*There is a fountain filled with blood.*’ This is one of the Olney Hymns, and throughout all these the tread of his Muse is inclined to be heavy.

For example :

Friends and ministers said much
The Gospel to enforce ;
But my blindness still was such,
I chose a legal course.

And again :

Israel in ancient days
Not only had a view
Of Sinai in a blaze,
But learned the Gospel too.³

Still, we may be disposed to deal gently with the author of ‘*God moves in a mysterious way.*’ Tennyson and others have been laid sparingly under contribution, but we might draw more boldly from such sources with advantage. In the Positivist Hymn-book Wordsworth, Archbishop Trench, Charles Kingsley, Shelley, Longfellow, Herbert, Herrick, Cardinal Newman, Clough, Lord Houghton, Morris, and Mrs. Browning all find place ; and though, from the nature of the case, secular poetry enters more easily into this than into a Church hymnal, we have hardly made the most of our opportunities in this direction. For in many of the secular poets we shall find man and man’s destiny faithfully dealt with, and touched with a strong and skilful hand. Such poems may lack the conventional religious vesture in which we have come to think that all hymns should be clothed. But this matters little, so long as the poems themselves appeal straight and true to the instincts by which life is sanctified, and from which religion itself draws all its strength.

Two instances must suffice. As we pass from childhood to manhood, and thence from the crowning days of life’s completeness down through the years which bring us to life’s end, most of us have much the same story to tell. No great calamity has darkened our path, no surpassing happiness has flooded it with delight. We have all been battered by more or less the same experiences, and, more or less, we have each of us learned the lessons which they teach. If we look back with some faint regret to the lost days of our youth, we have no real desire to recall them. Life still has its quiet interests for us, its sober pleasures ; but though we may dread the wrench of parting, we shall be content,

³ The *Miscellaneous Poems* of Georgina Farrer, quoted by Mr. Ross in his *Masques and Phases*, show what atrocities can be committed in the name of the hymn.

when the time comes, to depart. And the manner of our going, could we choose it ?—

Sunset, and evening star,
And one clear call for me——

Surely any hymnal would be richer by the inclusion of this exquisite poem.⁴

Again, the religious imagination is readily stirred by the contemplation of Nature's stupendous forces, whose revel, as it believes, is yet controlled by the divine hand. The Psalms are full of this feeling, which also inspires some of the best hymns. And among these might not a place be found for Swinburne's splendid lines to the storm-blast from the north ?—

O stout North-easter,
Sea-King, land-waster,
For all thine haste, or
Thy stormy skill,
Yet hadst thou never,
For all endeavour,
Strength to dis sever
Or strength to spill,
Save of His giving
Who gave our living,
Whose hands are weaving
What ours fulfil ;
Whose feet tread under
The storms and thunder ;
Who made our wonder to work His will.

His years and hours,
His world's blind powers,
His stars and flowers,
His nights and days,
Sea-tide and river,
And waves that shiver,
Praise God the giver
Of tongues to praise.
Winds in their blowing,
And fruits in growing ;
Time in its going,
While Time shall be ;
In death and living,
With one thanksgiving,
Praise Him whose hand is the strength of the sea.

NORMAN PEARSON.

⁴ It is, as a matter of fact, included in the *Church Hymns* of the S.P.C.K.

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